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## XI.—*VERS LIBRE*

According to whether we count, in verse, all syllables, regardless of accent, or only the accented syllables, we recognize in the modern languages two systems of versification, the foot system and the syllabic system. In each of the following verses of Boileau, for example, we may enumerate twelve syllables,<sup>1</sup> or find four feet thus graphically illustrated:

En vain | contre le Cid | un mini | stre se ligue,  
Tout Paris | pour Chimè | ne a les yeux | de Rodrigue.

We have been taught that French verse is purely syllabic. English, German, Italian—all the other languages—admit the accentual, that is, the foot system in their verse structure. Strange, is it not, that French alone should make an exception to this universal law! I shall endeavor to show that there is no such exception, that French versification also rests essentially on the foot system, that it combines strong and weak syllables to obtain rhythm. It must be granted, however, that syllabism crept in surreptitiously at a certain period, and has caused the accentual system to be obscured and even forgotten by theorists and poets.

The main achievement of the French *vers libre* has been the rejection of all appearance of syllabism; consciously and methodically the poets of *vers libre* use the foot system. *Vers libre*, let this be emphasized to avoid confusion, has nothing in common with the so-called free verse outside of France. English and American poets have often made of *vers libre* an excuse for eccentricity and have rejected what

<sup>1</sup>Conventionally the “e muet” is not counted before a vowel or after the twelfth syllable.

the French poets hold as their most sacred principle. By *vers libre* the French poets mean freedom from arbitrary conventions, but strict observance of the laws of rhythm.

Rhythm in verse is produced by the recurrence of strong syllables at proportionate intervals. Each combination of strong and weak syllables forms a foot. The foot, as an element of rhythm, is the foundation of *vers libre*. At first *vers libre* appeared as a radical change in French versification. We shall see that it marks, on the contrary, a logical step in evolution.

A few investigators, such as Scoppa (1811), E. du Méril (1843), Becq de Fouquières (1879), and more recently Maurice Gramont (1913), have attempted to point out the rôle of the accent in the structure of French verse. A review of the main phases of French versification will show that the foot system remained its principal law from its origin to the *vers libre*.

Just as the French language is derived from popular Latin, so is the verse. The verse of popular Latin was based not on the quantity of syllables, but on their stress; not on combinations of long and short syllables, as in classical Latin, but on strong and weak syllables—in a word, on the foot system.

Ecce Caésar nūc triūphat qui subēgit Gallias.

Nicomēdes nōn triūphat qui subēgit Caesarem.

These verses reported by Suetonius as sung by the soldiers of Julius Caesar, have seven alternating accents and represent each a seven-foot verse; and such versification introduced into Gaul became the model of the Latin liturgical hymns:

Omnes qui gaudētis pāce mōdo verūm judicāte.

Abundantia peccatorum solet fratres conturbare.

Here we have, in a hymn of Saint Augustine, a regular eight-foot meter. It was not uncommon for this form of verse to use rhyme and a middle pause. There was also a marked tendency to have a regular number of syllables correspond with a regular number of accents in each line. But the foot division remained the supreme law.

From popular Latin, through the liturgical hymns, comes the verse of Old French. The first specimen appears during the ninth century in the *Cantilène de Sainte Eulalie*. This poem, we remember, has been a bone of contention among scholars. Littré and Paul Meyer wanted to make it out syllabic. French verse had always been considered syllabic. This *Cantilène* is French; therefore it must be syllabic. There was, to be sure, some difficulty in fitting the argument to the case. Obviously, the lines of the poem have not the same number of syllables. Littré cut off or stretched out all the line on a Procrustes bed, and by this process made the whole poem into verses of ten syllables. P. Meyer, less violent, but more ingenious, takes the lines two by two and gives to each couplet the same number of syllables. It is difficult to see how the lines can be equalized in such a couplet as this:

La domnizelle celle kosa non contredist,  
Volt lo seule lazsier si ruovet Krist.

Gaston Paris maintained that the poem of *Sainte Eulalie* is built on the foot system uniquely, that the accented syllables alone count in the verse, but that the verses are arranged two by two, each couplet having the same number of accents. The poet did not invent a new process of versification, he merely applied to the vulgar tongue the method used in the verse of medieval Latin. This method was the foot system. A few verses will serve as an illustration:

Buóna pulcélla fut Eulália  
 Bel avret corps, bellezour ánima . . .

Two verses of four feet each.

La domnizelle celle kosa non contredíst,  
 Volt lo seule lazsiér si ruóvet Kríst.

Two verses of five feet each, perfectly regular in meter, although the first line has thirteen syllables and the second may have only ten.

Yet the prevailing tendency of medieval Latin verse to have a definite number of syllables in each line was to be expected in the poems written in the vulgar tongue. This we find to be true in the *Passion du Christ* and in the *Vie de Saint Léger*, toward the latter part of the tenth century and the beginning of the eleventh.

Dómine Diéu deveíms loder  
 Et á sos sanz honor porter. (Saint Leger)

This is a four-foot verse, each verse having eight syllables. From that time on French versification follows exclusively this method; that is to say, the foot system combined with a definite number of syllables. In the eleventh century, the verses of the *Chanson de Roland* have a regular decasyllabic meter, with an accent on the fourth and on the tenth syllable:

Rolláns reguárdet Olivíer al viságe.

This line has four feet; the weak syllable at the cæsura and the weak syllable at the end are not counted in the meter.

The twelve-syllable line, which appears at the end of the eleventh century in the *Voyage de Charlemagne* and in the

twelfth century in the *Roman d'Alexandre* follows the same principle:

Li roís qui Macidoíne tenait en sa baillíe,  
 Et Grése et le país, et toute Esclavonie, . . .  
 Une dame prist bèle, et genté et escavie,  
 Olimpiás ot nóm, fille du roi d' Erménie.  
 Et la dame fut preús et de gránt signorie. . . .

This is the alexandrine. It is essentially a four-foot line divided into regular hemistichs. Two accents fall necessarily on syllables six and twelve. The other accents are variable.

Since the alexandrine was destined to play the most important part in the development of French poetry, we shall follow it through its subsequent phases. Let us not forget that up to the seventeenth century, lyric poetry did not make use of the alexandrine. This verse, together with the decasyllable, is limited to the epic genre. It is not surprising therefore that with the downfall of the *Chansons de Geste* the alexandrine falls into desuetude for nearly two centuries. When at the end of the fifteenth century the Grands Rhétoriqueurs try their hands at it, its nature is thoroughly misunderstood and syllabism predominates over the foot system. Thus Martin Lefranc:

Regarde vers le ciel; rends ton devoir à cil  
 Qui note tous tes faits jusques un poil de cil . . .  
 Fourfit vers son Seigneur par désobéissance,  
 Fiche ton cœur à Dieu, car tu ne peux sans ce.

It would be difficult to find in the structure of these lines, typical of the period, any rhythmic principles. The feeling for accent in the language has disappeared. Rhyme itself no longer requires a strong syllable.

A reaction was inevitable. Poets felt that something

was lacking in their verse. What, they did not know. Baïf and his disciples experimented with the classical Latin system of quantity. Although they mechanically imitated the arrangement of long and short syllables in hexameters and pentameters, it was evident that their product was no verse at all. On the contrary, when their supposed long and short syllables coincided with the strong and weak syllables of natural speech, the poets felt at once that the verse gained a singing quality, it had rhythm. To reinforce this rhythm, they even added rhyme both to the middle and to the end of the verse.

Henriette est mon bien; de sa bonté l'ombre je sens bien;  
 Mais elle y joint la rigueur, dont elle abat ma vigueur.  
 Dans le bouche elle a le miel, mais son cœur est de pur fiel.  
 L'un d'espoir me soutient, l'autre à la mort me retient.

Rapin, the proud inventor of these lines, thought he was writing distichs in the classical manner. In reality his verses, with their middle rhyme, are solidly constructed on the four-foot system. Such experiments, however crude they were, had an immediate effect. The ear of the poet grew sensitive to rhythm, and this rhythm was to be founded on the natural laws of the language. With the great poets of the Pléiade the alexandrine come back to its traditional form, a twelve-syllable line built on the foot system:

Quand vous serez bien vieille, au soir, à la chandelle,  
 Assise auprès du feu, devidant et filant. . . .

These verses of Ronsard contain regularly four accents, with their traditional arrangement.

Malherbe and Boileau formulated several laws concerning the nature of rhyme, hiatus, and the cæsura, but these

restrictions did not affect in any way the rhythmic accent. Throughout the seventeenth century the foot system predominates in the work of all the great poets.

Oui, je viens dans son temple adorer l'éternel.  
Je viens selon l'usage antique et solennel . . .

Four feet with syllables six and twelve regularly accented.

With Corneille, Racine, and above all La Fontaine, the alexandrine reaches its highest qualities of rhythm. The number twelve gives thirty-six possible combinations of strong and weak syllables, thirty-six varieties of feet. The accusation of monotony against the alexandrine can be made only by those who do not understand it.

And yet the tumultuous lyricism of the romantic school could not be bound within the classical alexandrine. More variety, more contrast were still needed. Hugo made a revolution. He introduced the three-foot measure:

Je disloquai ce grand niais d'alexandrin . . .

This verse certainly bears the marks of dislocation. It is a three-foot line; the accent on the sixth syllable has disappeared. If the accent on the twelfth syllable disappears also, the number twelve is no longer the unit of verse; and this is another innovation of Victor Hugo:

Le jour plonge<sup>1</sup> au plus noir du gouffre<sup>2</sup> et va chercher  
L'ombre<sup>3</sup> et la baise au front<sup>4</sup> sous l'eau<sup>5</sup> sombre et hagarde<sup>6</sup>.

Here the poet ceases to rely on the number twelve. His foot combinations overflow from one line into another. The two lines quoted merge into each other to form a rhythmic succession of six feet.

There remained to be repudiated the laws restricting rhyme, the hiatus, the conventional number of syllables. This step was taken by Verlaine:



Simplement, comme on verse un parfum sur une flamme  
 Et comme un soldat répand son sang pour la patrie,  
 Je voudrais pouvoir mettre mon cœur avec mon âme  
 Dans un beau cantique à la sainte Vierge Marie.

If we count the syllables, there are thirteen in each of the lines; but syllables count no more toward the verse unit, which rests entirely on the foot system. Let us also note that the alternation of masculine and feminine rhymes is repudiated. At times the rhyme becomes merely phonetic:

C'est le chien de Jean de Nivelle  
 Qui mord sous l'œil même du guet  
 Le chat de la mère Michel;  
 François-les-bas-bleus s'en égaie.

(*Romances sans Paroles*, VI)

*Nivelle* and *Michel*, *guet* and *égaie*—this marks a revolution in rhyme. It is purely phonetic, and just as rich as the best "rime riche" of the Parnassians.

The alexandrine, dislocated by Hugo, distorted by Verlaine, now keeps the appearance of syllabism in print only. Change the typography of the alexandrine and you have *vers libre*. Why keep the pretense of syllabism, since it is a mere illusion? And yet it required more courage to take that step than for Hugo to create the three-foot verse. Verlaine himself protests against such an undertaking:

J'ai élargi la discipline du vers et cela est bon, mais je ne l'ai pas supprimée. Pour qu'il y ait vers, il faut qu'il y ait rythme. A présent on fait des vers à mille pattes. On appelle cela des vers rythmiques. Mais nous ne sommes ni des Latins ni des Grecs; nous sommes des Français, sacré nom de Dieu.<sup>2</sup>

This statement is full of significance. Verlaine admits that rhythm is essential to every verse. But he does not realize, in spite of his own practice, that rhythm depends

<sup>2</sup> J. Huret, *Enquête sur l'Evol. Litt.*, p. 69.

on the arrangement of feet and not on the numeration of syllables. The moment the poets became conscious of that fact, *vers libre* was created.

The first *vers libres* appeared in 1885 and were coincident with the symbolic movement, but in no way its preferred medium. A great cry of indignation arose against *vers libre*. Such aversion was largely due to the traditional reverence for the typographical arrangement of lines. The above-quoted lines of Hugo, if differently printed, would become excellent *vers libres*:

Le jour plonge  
 Au plus noir du gouffre  
 Et va chercher l'ombre  
 Et la baise au front  
 Sous l'eau sombre  
 Et hagarde.

Each foot has been liberated from the bondage of the number twelve and from the bondage of the rhyme. Yet the rhythm has been kept intact. The test may be reversed. We may take some *vers libres*, write them in lines of twelve syllables, and the illusion of the syllabic system will be restored:

Si j'ai parlé de mon amour, c'est à l'eau lente . . .  
 Si j'ai parlé de mon amour, c'est à l'oiseau  
 Qui passe et chante avec le vent; si j'ai parlé  
 C'est à l'écho.

These three lines, constructed from a poem of Henri de Régnier, show how the foot system can be made to coincide with the syllabic arrangement. By such adaptation, we have reconstructed the verse of twelve syllables with a three-foot division, the typical romantic verse.

But let us study the poem in its original form and note how the poet has been guided uniquely by the foot and by the musical value of the words.

Si j'ai parlé  
De mon amour, c'est à l'eau lente  
Qui m'écoute quand je me penche  
Sur elle; si j'ai parlé  
De mon amour, c'est au vent  
Qui rit et chuchote entre les branches;  
Si j'ai parlé de mon amour, c'est à l'oiseau  
Qui passe et chante  
Avec le vent;  
Si j'ai parlé  
C'est à l'écho.

These eleven lines contain successively the following number of feet: first line, one foot; second line, two feet; third line, two feet; fourth line, two feet; fifth line, two feet; sixth line, three feet; seventh line, three feet; eighth line, two feet; ninth line, one foot; tenth line, one foot; eleventh line, one foot.

The design of the rhythm is based on the four-syllable foot, that is, three weak syllables preceding a strong syllable. Variety is secured by the occasional intermingling of a two- or three-syllable foot. The movement is given by the first verse, reinforced in the second; then it curves lightly, reappears, meanders again until in the last three lines it reaffirms itself, solid and regular, to the greatest satisfaction of our ear.

Not only is there a dominant movement which gives the rhythm, there is also a dominant note which guides the melody: *lente, penche, vent, branches, chante, vent*. By the judicious intermingling of only two other vowels, *é, é, eau, o*, the poet has obtained a beautiful musical theme. We do not refer to other qualities in the interior of the verse, equally important though they are for judging the poem in its entirety.

The experiment of transposing *vers libre* into syllabic lines should not be misunderstood. Since poets of *vers libre* have no consideration for the syllabic arrangement,

one must not expect all their verses to submit meekly to such treatment. Besides, these poets give a phonetic value to their syllables, and it is as such, and not graphically, that we should count them. Nearly all the poems of Paul Fort may be thus translated into regular alexandrines, alexandrines even more rhythmical than could be found in the classics. Paul Fort chose to print his stanzas in the form of paragraphs, which to the eye look like prose, but which to the ear move rhythmically and sing beautifully. *Vers libre* is written for the ear, not for the eye. It is a return to oral poetry.

*Vers libre* means emancipation from the tyranny of rhyme, deliverance of the foot system from the syllabic bondage, freedom for the poet to follow the impulse of his own personal rhythm, freedom also to choose all the means at his disposal to enhance the beauty of his verse. He may use rhymes in any combination, assonance, alliteration, repetition, or no rhyme at all. Since the ear is the only judge in matters of euphony, the question of the hiatus disappears.

To complete this study one must not omit the statements of the masters of *vers libre*. Only brief quotations can be given here.

Vielé-Griffin: "Le vers est libre, ce qui veut dire que nulle forme fixe n'est plus considérée comme le nombre nécessaire à l'expression de toute pensée poétique; que désormais comme toujours, mais consciemment libre cette fois, le poète obéira au rythme personnel. . . ." <sup>3</sup>

Henri de Régnier: "Qu'importe le nombre du vers si le rythme est beau?"

A. Retté: "Le seul guide pour le poète est le rythme, non pas un rythme appris, garotté par mille règles que

<sup>3</sup> Vielé-Griffin, *Joies*, 1889, Préface.

d'autres inventèrent, mais un rythme personnel, qu'il doit trouver en lui-même." <sup>4</sup>

E. Verhaeren: " Je crois que le poète . . . n'a d'autre but que d'exprimer avec ses passions, ses sentiments et ses idées dans la forme d'art qu'il s'est choisie. Cette forme, il la doit trouver moins dans les règles admises et les prosodies officielles qu'en lui-même. Tout ce qu'un vrai poète conçoit se répercute dans son être entier, dans ses os, ses muscles, ses nerfs, grâce à une émotion contagieuse qui va des choses à son âme. Cette communication fidèle et soudaine crée dans l'être entier du poète un ébranlement, une dynamique spéciale, et c'est ce mouvement intérieur et profond qui lui fournira le rythme de ses vers."

These poets are most emphatic in declaring that the unique law of their verse is rhythm, personal rhythm, rhythm engendered by the very nature of their emotions.

If there were any doubt left about the rhythmic qualities of *vers libre*, the scientific investigations of Robert de Souza would convince the most incredulous. Assisted by the abbé Rousselot, the famous phonetician, Robert de Souza applied the experimental test to the poems of *vers libre*. The results, registered by recording instruments, prove that *vers libre* is essentially rhythmic.

Dr. W. M. Patterson of Columbia University, has also applied the experimental method to the analysis of English free verse. His results are tabulated in *The Rhythm of Prose*, a most scientific work. He comes to the conclusion that the English free verse has no regular rhythm, that free verse is a fiction, that however poetic, imagist, or eccentric it may be, it belongs to a genre unpretentiously called prose.

<sup>4</sup> A Retté, *Mercure de France*, 1893.

In conclusion, I should like to reiterate that French verse originated with the foot system; it lapsed momentarily into syllabism, then it systematically combined syllabism and the foot, until *vers libre* brought it back to the foot system exclusively.

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